

From Despair To Hope Series

May 19, 2021

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Summary: Paul comes to the end of his rope, but he does not come to the end of his hope. He had no resource in himself, and all he could do was to surrender his life and future to the providence of God.

His experience reveals that there is often a link between the lows of life and the highs.

The lows, or the failures, are often the motivating factors in our reaching for the heights and success. Had he never been crushed down by that negative experience he may never have been moved to change and climb to new heights.

We see this process going on in the life of Paul as he records for all the world to see the depths of despair which forced him the heights of hope.

Paul has been as low as a Christian can get, and he has been as high as a Christian can get.

He knows the depth to which a Christian can sink in negative feelings, and he knows the heights in which they can soar in positive feelings.

Paul opens and shares this intimate view of his own emotions, for he knows it will be a comfort to many, and God knew it would be a comfort to millions all through history.

Christians need to know it is not a sign of lack of faith, or that God has abandoned you, because you feel sunk in a pit of despair.

It has happened to the best of God's family, and is, therefore, an acceptable state of emotion even though it is not a state where you want to settle down and live.

The proper response to this low state is to be motivated to climb to a higher level of faith and hope.

We want to look at these two levels of life that Paul experienced so we can learn also to cope with the depths and climb to the heights.

Let us look first at-

I. THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR.

The Greek word Paul uses here to describe his low point means-to have no outlet whatever.

Paul felt trapped with no way to escape. It was a hopeless situation, and there was nothing he could do.

It looked like death was inevitable, and there was no other choice but to die. Paul was at a dead end.

The enemy was bearing down on him and there was no exit. The pressure was great that it was beyond his ability to endure it.

Paul was admitting that he had come to the end of his rope, and he could no longer hang on.

This is a terrible place to be, but God had Paul share this so that Christians might not be superficial in their judgments of Christians who reach this level of despair.

Many Christians who have lived sheltered lives, as many of us have, do not know the depths to which life can push the emotions.

We have all felt depressed but despair goes deeper than depression. It is the feeling of utter hopelessness.

It is a very dangerous state of mind, for this is what leads people to take their own life. It is the feeling that made Job wish he had never been born.

It is the feeling that made Solomon feel that everything was vanity and totally meaningless.

Despair leads to all kinds of meaninglessness. But despair does explain meaninglessness.

The reality of despair helps us understand all of the mysteries of evil, and why people engage in killings so brutal and inhuman.

Despair means there is no way out, and so what do you have to lose?

Despair causes people to go and shoot fellow workers, or to kill strangers on the street.

Despair causes teenagers by the thousands to take their own life every year.

George Eliot said something long ago that fits our day as well: "There is no despair so absolute as that which comes with the first moment of our first great sorrow, when we have not yet known what it is to have suffered and be healed, to have despaired and have recovered hope."

Studies show that despairing teens take their own lives because they think the feelings they have at the moment are permanent.

The broken heart they feel when their boy or girl friend dumps them is what they think they have to live with the rest of their lives, and so they cut their life short to end the pain.

They do not have the ability to see beyond despair to a whole new life of joy.

Do not take despair lightly. It is a very dangerous emotion, and it is what makes this a dangerous world in which to live.

But the point of all this is that Christians can experience it. It is so negative, and the cause of such depths of evil in the world that many Christians refuse to believe that it is possible to be a Christian in such a state of despair.

Jeremy Taylor wrote, "It is impossible for that man to despair who remembers that his Helper is omnipotent."

The problem with making such a radical statement is that it ignores the Word of God, which is our final authority.

If a Christian can or cannot feel despair, it is not going to be settled by a survey, a vote, or by scholars doing research.

It is settled by the revelation God has given us, and Paul states it clearly that he and young Timothy despaired even of life. They felt utterly hopeless with no way of escape.

Why is it important to accept the fact that a Christian can reach the depths of despair?

Because it is in assuming they can't have led many Christians to neglect the ministry of comfort, and let Christians descend into a pit so deep they cannot get out.

Never assume that a Christian cannot descend to the pit of despair.

The Word of God and the record of history make it clear that they can.

Christians who do not know that Christians can go so low, and feel rejected by God and man.

Those who hide these records from them for fear of hurting their faith rob them of the comfort they need to cling to their faith.

It is important for us to see Paul is in deep distress and despair.

He is overwhelmed by the troubles of life.

It is important for us to see that Paul prayed for the removal of his thorn in the flesh, and he did not get the healing.

It is important for us to see all of the negative experiences and emotions of Paul, for they are a source of great comfort for us when we suffer the same emotions.

Hide the negatives from people, and they feel alone as if they are the only Christian whoever felt like they feel.

This is to be a miserable comforter, and like Job's friends add weights to the crushing load that is already pushing down the suffering saint.

What does Paul do with his despair?

He shares it with the church.

He says in verse 8, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered." And then he goes on to inform them of the awful pressures they feel that are beyond their ability to endure.

You would think Paul would keep quiet about such a depth of despair. After all, he is an Apostle and an example to all believers.

Should he be exposing his inner soul like this and telling Christians how deep a pit he is in?

Yes, he should, for it is the source of great comfort to millions that he was in that state.

But the comfort does not end with the feeling we are not alone, but in the highest of company if we are in the pit of despair.

There is better news yet, and Paul goes on to deal with-

II. THE HEIGHTS OF HOPE.

St. Philip of Neri cried out in the streets of Rome, "I am in despair, I am in despair." A friend asked how he could say such a thing and he responded, "I despair of myself, but I trust in God."

This is what Paul is saying here. He despaired of ever being able to save himself, but he did not despair of God's ability to save him.

He says in verse 9, "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead."

The value of despair is that it forces you to give up your pride and self-sufficiency, and realize that without God you are sunk.

The value of being so low is that there is nowhere else to look but up to God, who alone can give you hope.

Paul comes to the end of his rope, but he does not come to the end of his hope.

He had no resource in himself, and all he could do was to surrender his life and future to the providence of God.

This is that place in life where we see unique answers to prayer.

If there is no way out for man, and God is the only one who can deliver them, then there will be a marvelous demonstration of God's providence.

Paul was likewise delivered from his hopeless situation, and this filled his despairing heart with the highest of hopes, for he learned you can give up on yourself and your own ability to escape, but you ought never to give up on God, for He can deliver you from any pit no matter how deep and seemingly hopeless it is.

We see an example of this in Psa. 107 where God's people were in a storm-tossed ship. It looked hopeless for them to survive.

Starting at verse 26 we read, "In their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men. They were at their wits end. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distress.

He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and He guided them to their desired haven."

They were helpless in a hopeless situation. They were in the depths of despair, and yet they were also hopeful, for they cried out to God and He rescued them.

The believer has to live sometimes in the impossible world of despair and hope at the same time.

Politics makes strange bed fellows we say, but so does faith.

Despair and hope are opposites, but they are often partners.

The one aids us to let go of self, and the other aids us to take hold on God.

Paul is teaching to the Corinthians that they are to be comforted in their despair, for it happens to the best.

Be comforted because it forces you to look to God and be lifted to the heights of hope.

Paul would say, if you work on by looking up you can reach the heights from that pit.

This is the good news for both the world and the church. It is the greatest message of comfort in the world, for even the worst sinner in the pit of despair can look up, and by the love of Christ be taken out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

That is what salvation is. It is being taken out of the pit of self-sufficiency and being set on the Rock of Christ's sufficiency.

Our hope is not in self, not in the government, not in the U.N., not in

Technology, and not in all the idols of history, but our hope is in God.

Anything that can get us to focus on this narrow way is a blessing, even if it means the pit of despair that robs us of all the other hopes.

The world is indeed a hopeless case, but that is why God needed to provide us with a Savior.

The world cannot save itself, nor can any person in the world.

Our hope is in God alone, for He specializes in hopeless cases.

The lesson Paul wants all Christians to learn is not that there are not hopeless situations. He knows there are, for he had been in such situations.

But the point is, it was not hopeless for God.

We have a right to feel hopeless and helpless when all our powers are fruitless. But we also have a responsibility to then look to God for whom there are no hopeless situations.

The Comforter helps the hopeless look beyond their despair.

Paul's point is don't give up in despair, for failure is a part of life.

Just give up trusting in your own power to solve the problem.

Let go of the self-sufficiency and put your hope in God.

Is it 100% guaranteed God will lift you out of the pit?

No! Paul was rescued often, but he was finally killed by Nero.

The point is that Paul could have died much earlier, but God gave him assurance that he would be spared until his work was done.

That is all the hope anyone needs.

Like Paul, we should all be looking to God no matter what our circumstances, and be ever moving out of despair into hope.